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ABSTRACT

This study examined the effects of marital violence on children's relationships with parents, peers, and teachers. Forty-eight 4-year-olds and their parents participated in two laboratory sessions: one with all three family members and one with the child alone with several unfamiliar peers. Half of the marital couples were physically violent, while the remaining 24 couples had not engaged in physical violence in the past year. During the family session, children and their parents were asked to play the game Elefun (Trademark), in which they caught cloth butterflies blown through the air by a plastic elephant. During the peer session, children played the tile-matching game Memory (trademark). Parents also completed the Conflict Tactics Scale, Conners Rating Scales, Parenting Daily Hassles, and Parent Satisfaction Scale, while the children's teachers completed the Conners Rating Scales. Analysis found that parents in violent families were more negative in their communication and less satisfied as parents. When interacting with unfamiliar peers, children from violent families tended to engage in more negative behavior than did children from nonviolent families, and also tended to exhibit more behavior problems. (Contains 16 references.) (MDM)

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The Effects of Marital Violence on Children's Relationships with Parents, Peers, and Teachers

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Poster presented at the 1997 Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development, Washington, D.C.

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Abstract

Children of maritally conflictual parents are at increased risk for mental and physical health difficulties. Violent marital conflict appears to be particularly noxious for children. However, the pathways by which marital conflict and violence affects children remain unclear.

One potential pathway is that children of violent families learn faulty conflict resolution strategies. The current poster presents the results of a study of 48 4-year-old children and their parents. Half the marital couples were physically violent, while the remaining couples had not engaged in physical violence in the past year.

Across tasks and reporters, maritally violent families differed from nonviolent families. As compared to nonviolent parents, parents in violent families were more negative in their communication and less satisfied as parents. Children from violent families differed from children in nonviolent families in their relationships with peers and in their evaluations from teachers. Children from violent families were more negative in interactions with peers, less confident in social settings, and reported to have more behavior problems in preschool than children of nonviolent homes.

Taken together, these findings provide support for the hypothesis that children from maritally conflictual homes may learn maladaptive interaction patterns, affect regulation, and conflict resolution skills from their parents, and this pathway may help to explain the negative effects of marital conflict on children.

Research has demonstrated that children of maritally conflictual parents are at increased risk for difficulties in mental and physical well-being (Cummings, Davies, & Simpson, 1994; Katz & Gottman, 1993; Kerig, Cowan, & Cowan, 1993; Kurdek, 1991). Research has further suggested that marital conflict that is violent is especially noxious for children (cf., Cummings & Davies, 1994).

One domain in which children of discordant marriages evidence difficulties is in their social relationships. Of particular interest is that children of distressed marriages have been found to experience difficulties with relationships beyond their families, and particularly within their peer relationships (Gottman & Katz, 1989; Katz, Kramer, & Gottman, 1992). However to date, the mechanisms linking marital functioning and children's extrafamilial relationships remain unclear.

One potential pathway linking marital distress and children's poor social adjustment is elevated family stress and poor conflict resolution. Maritally distressed families may engage in more negative and stressful interpersonal exchanges, and may use less adaptive strategies for managing family conflict. This may be particularly relevant for maritally violent families; such families may experience heightened levels of family stress and hassles, and may rely on ineffective or violent means of resolving family conflict. Young children's exposure to physically violent and stressful family interactions may result in less well developed skills for managing interpersonal negativity and conflict. In turn, such skills deficits may render children of violent marriages less adept at managing interpersonal stress, and may contribute to relationship difficulties that extend beyond the family.

This study examined family interaction and young children's social competencies and

behavioral adjustment. The study included forty-eight 4-year-old children and their parents. Half of the marital couples were physically violent, while the remaining 24 couples had not engaged in physical violence in the past year. It was anticipated that, as compared to maritally nonviolent families, maritally violent families would demonstrate greater family negativity and higher family stress. In addition, it was anticipated that children of maritally violent families would evidence difficulties beyond the family context; specifically, it was anticipated that children of maritally violent families would evidence more conflictual and negative interactions with parents and peers, more behavioral adjustment difficulties (both at home and at school).

Method

Participants

Forty-eight 4-year-old children (21 boys and 27 girls, mean age = 4 years, 5 months, SD = 3.48 months) and their parents participated in the study. Families were recruited through newspaper advertisements and flyers posted in preschools, libraries, and grocery stores. Families were paid $35 for their participation in two laboratory sessions. Reflective of the larger community from which they were recruited, families were primarily (96%) White and working- to middle-class.

Procedure

Families participated in two laboratory sessions: one with all three family members and one involving just the child. The child laboratory session involved two or three unfamiliar peers of the same sex. Families completed a variety of interaction tasks and self-report measures. Only the tasks and measures of interest to the current poster are described here.

Family game. Children and their parents were asked to play the game Elefun™. In this

game, a plastic elephant blows cloth butterflies into the air through a 4-ft. long trunk. Family members were given their own butterfly nets with which to catch the butterflies. Following three repetitions of the game, parents were instructed to get their child to clean up the game and other toys scattered around the room.

Marital discussion. Parents first agreed upon the top three issues or problems in their relationship. They were then instructed to discuss this issue for approximately 10 minutes.

Peer game. Children played the tile-matching game, Memory™. Children turned over pairs of tiles to try to find the matching pairs. The number of times the children played the game was equal to the number of children in the session.

Measures

Conflict Tactics Scale (Straus, 1979). This measure was used to assess marital violence, and includes scales assessing verbal reasoning, verbal aggression, and physical aggression. For the purposes of the current study, couples were considered violent if either partner reported that either partner had engage in any episode of physical aggression in the previous year.

Conners Rating Scales (Conners, 1985). Both parent and teacher forms of the Conners Rating Scales were used. These scales provide information about children's behavior problems in a variety of domains, including hyperactivity, conduct problems, and anxiety. Parents completed the forms independently, and teachers returned forms by mail. Because this was a nonclinical sample, raw scores rather than T-scores were used.

Parenting Daily Hassles (Crnic & Greenberg, 1990). This measure provides an assessment of minor stressors encountered in parenting. Scores are created reflecting both the frequency and intensity of these stresses.

Parent Satisfaction Scale (Guidubaldi & Cleminshaw, 1985). This measure assesses parenting satisfaction in several different areas, including spousal support, quality of parent-child relationship, family discipline and control, and global satisfaction, as well as producing a total satisfaction score.

Coding Systems

System for Coding Affect In Families. This global coding system for family interactions was derived from the work of Lindahl and colleagues (Lindahl, 1991; Lindahl & Malik, 1995) and provides negative and positive summary scores for parental interaction behaviors.

System for Coding Interactions in Dyads (Malik & Lindahl, 1995). This global coding system was used to code marital interactions. Negative and positive summary scores were created.

Peer Interaction Coding System. This coding system was developed based on the work of Gottman and colleagues (Gottman, 1983), and provides information about the child's behavior and affect in the peer group. The system includes both incident-based and global codes. Positive and negative summary scores were created from the global codes for the current study.

Results

In order to examine differences between violent and nonviolent families, a series of MANOVAs were conducted. Analyses were conducted separately within each domain.

Family Functioning

Parenting satisfaction and stress. Mothers in violent families were less satisfied as parents than mothers in nonviolent families, $F(1,46) = 4.36$, $p = .04$. As shown in Figure 1, analysis of the subscales revealed that this difference was primarily accounted for by less

satisfaction with spousal parenting support, $F(1,46) = 5.71$, $p = .02$. As shown in Figure 2, fathers in violent homes reported more frequent daily stressors in interacting with their children than did fathers in nonviolent homes, $F(1,43) = 5.93$, $p = .02$.

Parent-child and marital interaction. As shown in Figure 3, both in interacting with their children and with each other, parents in violent families were more negative than parents in nonviolent families. In triadic family interaction tasks, violent families engaged in greater negativity such as rejection, invalidation, and withdrawal, $F(2,45) = 4.07$, $p = .02$. Similarly, in the marital setting, members of violent families, particularly mothers, tended to engage in higher levels of negativity and conflict, coercive control, and withdrawal, $F(1,46) = 2.97$, $p = .09$.

Child-peer Functioning

As shown in Figure 4, when interacting with unfamiliar peers, children from violent families tended to engage in more negative behavior than did children from nonviolent families, $F(1,44) = 3.44$, $p = .07$. In this setting, children from violent families were also less confident and competent in interacting with peers, as shown in Figure 5. Children's ratings of themselves and peers exhibited a main effect of violence, $F(2,43) = 4.34$, $p = .02$. Examination of the univariate results revealed that this difference was largely accounted for by lower self-ratings given by children of violent homes as compared to children of nonviolent homes, $F(1,44) = 5.33$, $p = .03$.

Child Behavior Problems

As shown in Figure 6, children from violent homes tended to exhibit more behavior problems, $F(3,36) = 2.28$, $p = .096$. Examination of the univariate results revealed that this difference was primarily accounted for by teacher reports of child behavior problems. Teachers reported children from violent homes to exhibit significantly more behavior problems than

children from nonviolent homes, $F(1,38) = 7.02$, $p = .01$. As shown in Figure 7, examination of the subscale scores revealed that as compared to children from nonviolent homes, children from violent homes were reported to show more hyperactivy, $F(1,37) = 4.42$, $p = .04$, to have more conduct problems, $F(1,37) = 4.59$, $p = .04$, and to have more social problems, $F(1,37) = 4.68$, $p = .04$.

Discussion

The findings of this study lend support to the notion of the family as a critical context for the development of young children's interpersonal skills and competencies. Furthermore, findings suggest that for children of violent marriages, difficulties with interpersonal negativity and poor conflict management extend beyond the family context. More specifically, family violence and elevated stress appear to influence children's social interactions, relationships, and adjustment with their peers and teachers.

As anticipated, violent families evidenced many differences from nonviolent families. Not surprisingly, mothers in violent families tended to be more negative in marital discussions than mothers in nonviolent families. However, it appeared that high conflict and negativity was not confined to the marital relationship. During family interactions, parents of maritally violent families displayed more negativity with their children. As well, mothers reported lower parenting satisfaction and fathers reported more frequent hassles with children in violent as compared to nonviolent families. Taken together, these findings support the view that many aspects of family functioning, including family hassles, parenting satisfaction, and parent-child interactions, may be subject to spillover from marital conflict (see Erel & Burman, 1995, for a review).

Finally, results suggested that the negativity and poor conflict management associated with marital violence affects children in contexts beyond their families. Most notably, children from violent families displayed more negative behavior in interactions with peers. Such a finding lends support to the notion that children's ability to manage interpersonal negativity is affected by their experiences within their families. Children of maritally violent families may have limited exposure to adaptive conflict resolution strategies, and in turn may fail to develop these important competencies.

The development of preschoolers social competencies represents an important area of research. This developmental period may be particularly important in terms of understanding the links between family processes and children's social adjustment. The preschool years mark the beginning of the transition from family socialization to the development of relationships beyond the family. Family violence may be a risk factor associated with children's difficulties with this transition, and may offer us insight into the mechanisms underlying the relations between marital discord and children's social adjustment difficulties.

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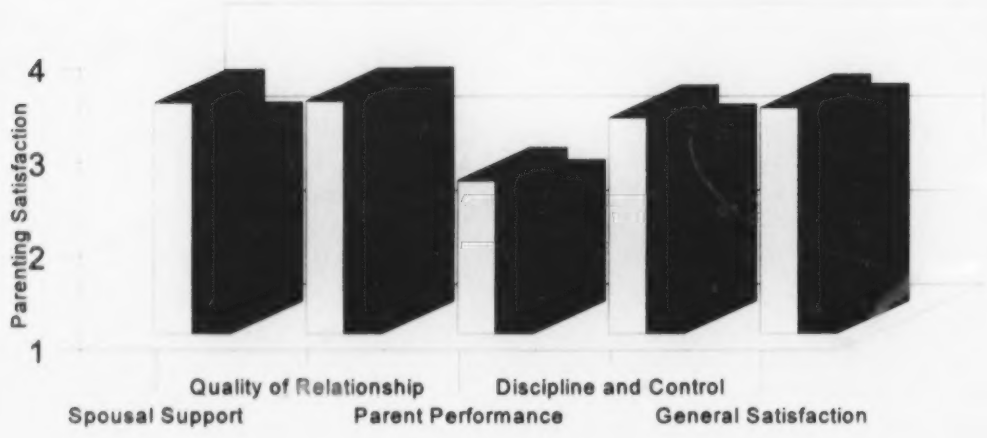
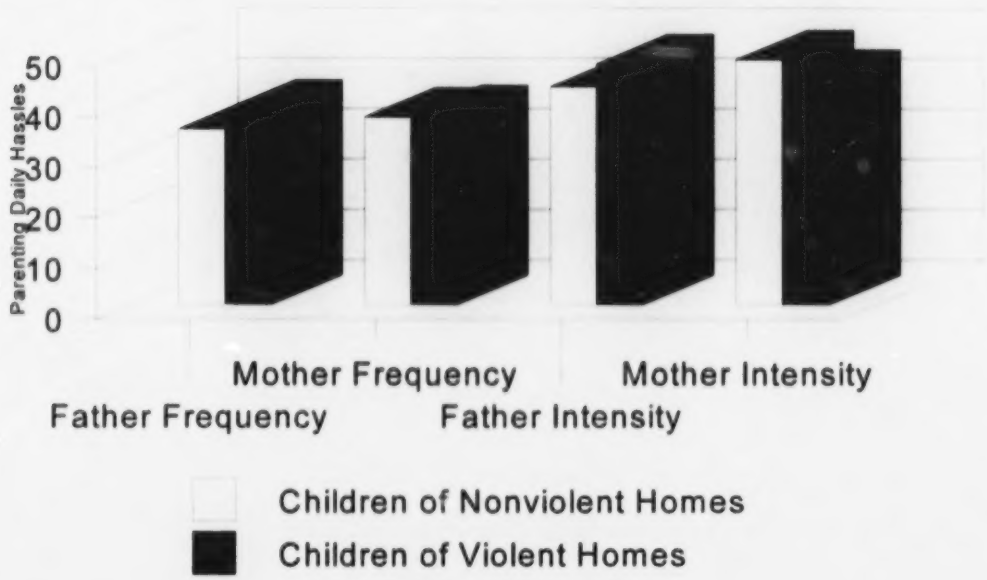
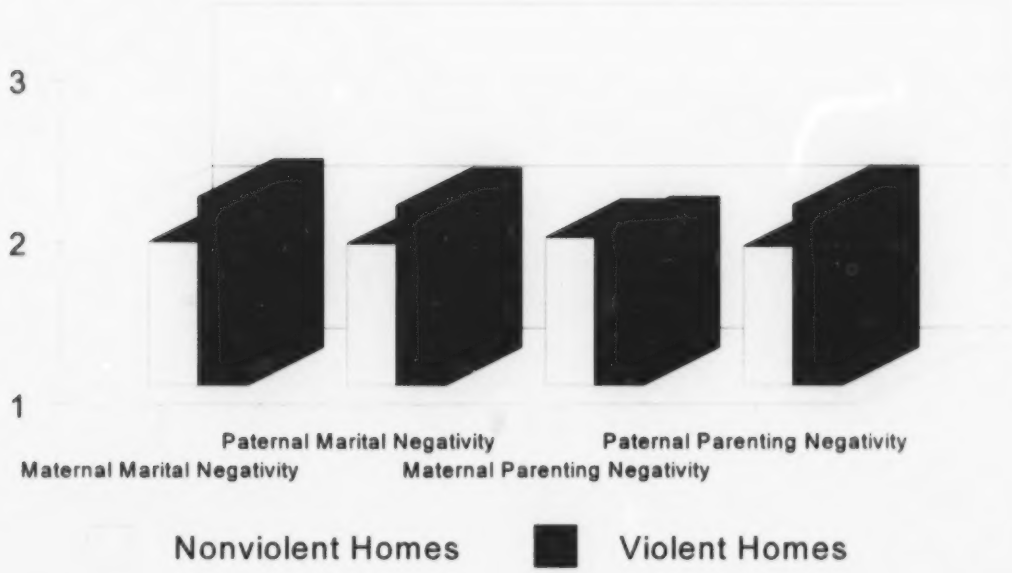
Maternal Parenting Satisfaction by Nonviolent and Violent Parents



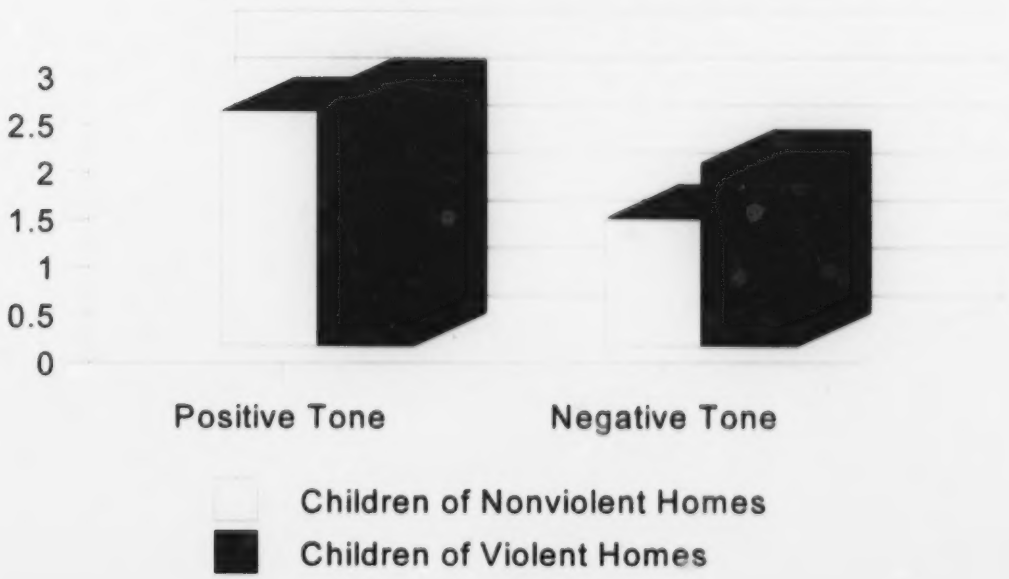
Parenting Daily Hassles by Nonviolent and Violent Parents



Interactional Negativity
by Nonviolent and Violent Parents

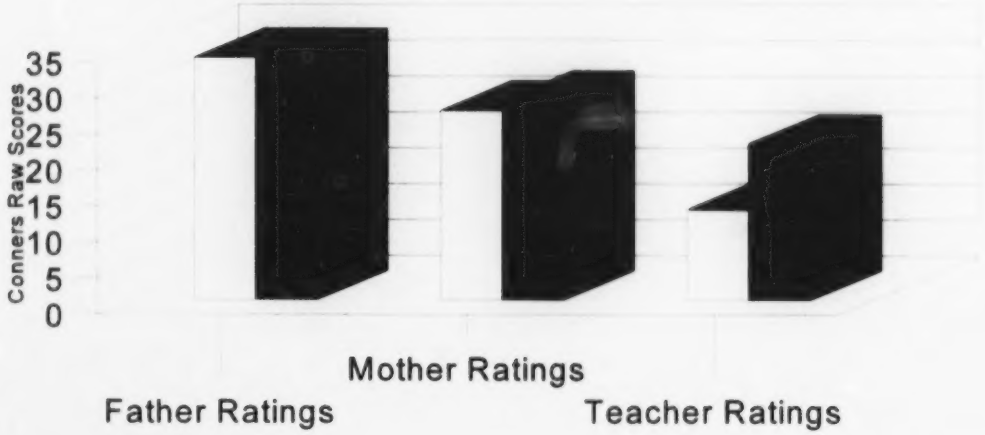


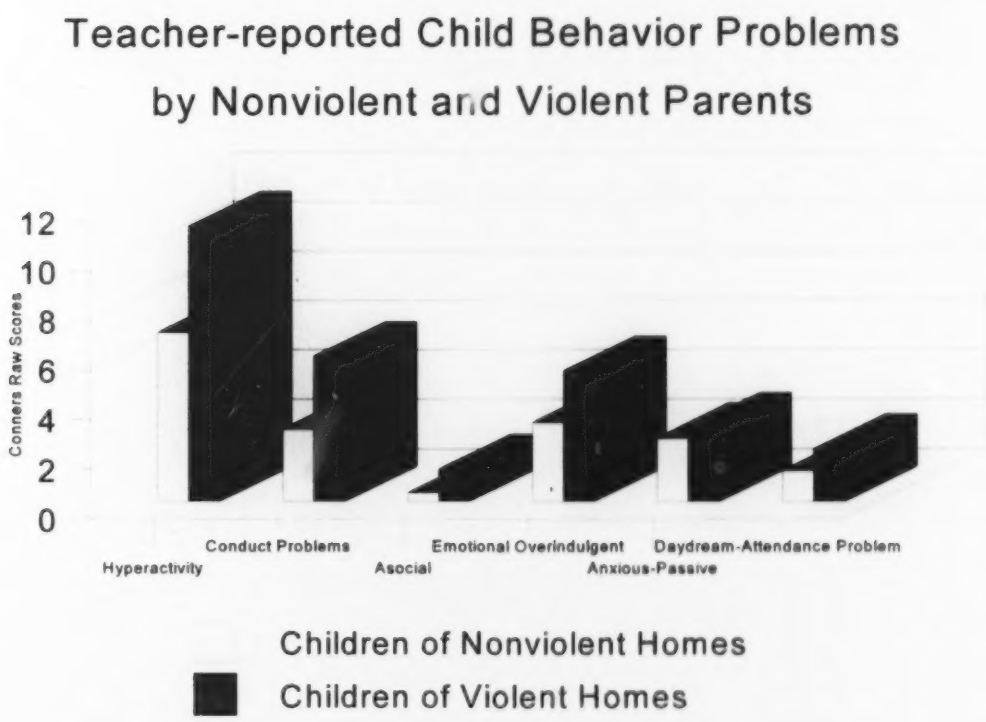
Children's Positivity and Negativity with Peers
by Nonviolent and Violent Parents



Self- and Peer-ratings of Children
by Nonviolent and Violent Parents

Rated Child Behavior Problems
by Nonviolent and Violent Parents




Teacher-reported Child Behavior Problems
by Nonviolent and Violent Parents
Conners Raw Scores
12
10
8
6
4
2
0
Hyperactivity
Conduct Problems
Asocial
Emotional Overindulgent
Anxious-Passive
Daydream-Attendance Problem
Children of Nonviolent Homes
Children of Violent Homes